

## **The Lost Dream of the Farmers Union**

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In 1900, circumstances were changing on the farm. Population in American cities stood at 30,160,000, while farms had 29,875,000 people. This was the first time in the American census that farm population was in the minority. According to one historian, “The prior two decades had brought new signs of rural stress, as well. Huge increases in the number of acres put to grain and the ubiquitous presence of the railroads created a true national agricultural market, sharply reducing the importance of local economies and driving down prices.” There were new questions to be faced, notably: “How could America hold onto the next generation of farmers?”

As one response, the Farmers’ Union originated in Point, Texas, in 1902. Newton Greshman, a county editor and farmer, was its founder. Greshman had concluded that farmers needed to build cooperatives to help themselves in the marketing of their products, rather than relying on “middlemen.” He also believed that the farmers needed to be educated on the problems that led to periodic depressions. The creators of the Farmers Union held, moreover, that a major reason for the breakdown of the farm economy had been of the lack of organization among family farmers.

Illinois was one of only eleven states that had no Farmers Union chapter by 1946. Organization of the Illinois Farmers Union began in 1954. To recruit farmers to join, early members visited neighbors, trying to get them to join.

The Farm Bureau also existed. It was a much bigger organization, and had support from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Farmers Union was for the family farm, while the Farm Bureau tended to encourage bigger, mass-production-type farms. Farm Bureau members were mostly Republicans, while the Farmers Union was mostly composed of Democrats.

There were also differences between these two organizations in ideals and goals. The Farmers Union asked that state legislatures and the U.S. Congress do for them what had been done for others. The Farmers Union pointed to the Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” as their guide. They believed right and truth would prevail. The Farmers Union pamphlet, “For This We Stand,” outlined more specific beliefs:

- That abundant production is in the public interest.
- That assured abundance requires a safety margin of surplus production.
- That justice demands protection of an income in return for the farmer’s contribution of an adequate food supply.
- That only the federal government can assure justice to farmers.

The Farmers Union fought for parity for farm families. After World War I, farmers’ gross income steadily declined. In 1919, farming income was \$18 billion, but by 1932 it was down to \$5 billion. Both farms and farm workers were victims of economic change over which they had no control.

The Farmers Union defined parity as, “The right of Farm Families by their work, management and property ownership to be able to earn incomes equivalent to those earned by people (with skill and effort) in other walks of life.” As applied to income, parity was, “That

gross income from agriculture which will provide the farm operator and his family with a standard of living equivalent to those afforded persons dependant upon other gainful occupations.” In 1951, the national income and farm operators income stood equal at a scale of 100, but by 1956 the national income was up to 123 and the farm operators was down to 70.



**Photograph Courtesy of the author**

Calvin Ferguson, a retired farmer in Winnebago County, remembers the days of the Farmers Union, “We fought like heck,” he reports. “Farmers hurt themselves with some of the things they did. It was an interesting time. Not too many people were Democrats. I finally gave up talking to the farmers. They always responded, ‘Oh well. It will be better. Maybe next year?’ Next year came and it wasn’t.” Retired Winnebago County farmer Leroy Gleasman, when asked what he remembers of Farmers Union, responded: “Ed Belin, Ed Wells, Cal Ferguson, Oscar Swanson and I traveled all over the state many, many times to get the state organization going.” Ed’s daughter Betsy Carlson remembers that, “Farmers Union was very much a part of my childhood...Daddy drove all over for it. It meant many meetings in Springfield. There was a sense of urgency and importance at our house.”

The Farmers Union grew entangled in national politics. At this time, “The National Farmers Union, the smallest of the nation’s three major farm organizations, stood alone in rejecting this Cold War mentality.” Critics said that the Farmers Union was sympathizing with the communists. Maybe, in the world of one historian this could be explained by, “the continued animosity between the Farmers Union and the Farm Bureau and by the desire of the latter to keep its rival under public suspicion.”

In the late 1950s Edwin Belin became the last president of the Farmers Union in Winnebago County. Katherine Burns Meyers-Phelps, whose father Leo Burns in 1954-1955 helped found the Farmers Union in Winnebago County, reports: “My father was such a strong Democrat that if the devil ran, he would still probably have voted for him. He felt close to Ed Belin and to the cause.” She also remembers that, “They (Farmers Union) were up against something big. Farm Bureau was national.”

Betsy Carlson recalls that, “Sometime in the mid ‘60s, after about ten years, Farmers Union in Winnebago County just died. I remember my mother pressuring my father to just let it go... I believe she was tired of all the work he put into the organization without a succeeding

generation of leadership coming forward. At some point there wasn't a Farmers Union anymore." She continues, "In the late '60s, we began to hear about the NFO (National Farmers Organization) organization. I believe, Bill Cannell came by and talked to my father. I remember asking him if he was going to join. His answer, 'No, I'm done'." [From Charles Simon Barret, *The Mission, History and Times of the Farmers' Union*; Allan Carlson, *The New Agrarian Mind*; student historian's interview with Betsy Carlson (Edwin Beliu's daughter), Sept. 26, 2003; Gladys Talbott Edwards, ed., "This is the Farmers' Union;" student historian's interview with Calvin Ferguson (former Winnebago county Farmers' Union member), Sept. 24, 2003; Bruce E. Field, *Harvest of Dissent*; For This We Stand, Farmers' Union Policy Leaflets No. 1-10; student historian's interview with LeRoy Gleasman (former Winnebago County Farmers' Union member), Sept. 24, 2003; *Illinois Union Farmer* (Nov. 1956); David Edgar Lindstrom, *American Farmers and Rural Organizations*; Everett E. Luoma, *The Farmers Takes a Holiday*; student historian's interview with Katherine Burus Meyers-Phelps (Leo Burns' daughter), Sept. 23, 2003; Alvin E. O'Konski, "Farmers' Union Represents Family Type Farmers", student historian's interview with Larry Quandt (Illinois Farmers' Union President, 2003), Sept. 29, 2003; Hal C. Nelson, ed., *Siuuissippi Saga*.]